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SUBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION OF TRAINEES.

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THIS REPORT GIVES A SUBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE GENERAL POPULATION FROM WHICH TRAINEES FOR THE MODESTO MULTI-OCCUPATIONAL PROJECT WERE SELECTED. IT INCLUDES AN EXTENSIVE STUDY OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF A GROUP OF WHITE MIGRANTS WHO MOVED FROM THE EASTERN UNITES STATES TO CALIFORNIA. THE AUTHOR ALSO INCLUDED REFERENCES TO THE CHANGING SOCIOECONOMIC AND MORAL STANDARDS OF THIS GROUP AND THEIR EVENTUAL WELFARE STATUS. THE AUTHOR HOPED THAT THE PROJECT WILL RECREATE FEELINGS OF SELF-DETERMINATION, INVOLVEMENT, AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THIS GROUP THROUGH ADULT TRAINING PROGRAMS. (PG)

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MODESTO MULTI-OCCUPATIONAL PROJECT

ADULT EDUCATION DIVISION

YOSEMITE JUNIOR COLLEGE DISTRICT

REPORT #1

SUBJECT: SUBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION OF TRAINEES

DATE: JANUARY 14, 1966

FROM: FRANK C. PEARCE

The enclosed report is intended to serve as a subjective description of the general population from which trainees are selected. The description does not fit any given individual, while various portions should describe the majority of the persons in the general population.

Data for this presentation were gathered from individuals within the general population, project trainees, instructors and others who are currently attempting to assist members of the "Prairie Society."

AC 000 057

THE PRAIRIE SOCIETY

Prologue

West of the Mississippi and east of the ninety-eighth meridian in the Sumna Grass country of North America existed a group of people herein referred to as the "Prairie Society." This Society originated from the Caucasian races of Western Europe. Its peoples had migrated to this land from the more populous areas of the eastern section of the United States or, in some cases, directly from Europe.

The land upon which they settled was usually devoid of rain much of the year, nearly barren of trees, and stretched in unending flatness as far as the eye could see. Here the moaning wind and the mourning grass accentuated the loneliness. This was the land where the buffalo previously served as the predominant source of food. This was the land where the native inhabitants, Indians, had been relegated to the bottom of the human hierarchy by the settlers.

The distance from one dwelling to the next was often great, and each household had to be, in a large measure, self-subsistent -- its occupants self-sufficient. At the same time, in order to survive on this land with its harsh climate, unfriendly native inhabitants, and loneliness, these settlers had to accept each other unconditionally when help was needed. Bound by a common need for protection and companionship, all were welcome to partake of the food, lodging, and protection of any home. In this setting an almost clannish atmosphere of mutual dependence developed.

Later, because of the phenomenon known as the "Dust Bowl" and other factors, these same people left this land of struggle and harshness seeking a new place where opportunity and hope appeared brighter, where the struggle for continued life seemed less severe.

Many of the people in the Prairie Society moved westward to the Golden State. This movement was in keeping with a pattern they had followed for many years. When local opportunity had diminished, the Society moved on to a new frontier. Somewhere across the ocean -- beyond the mountains, or where the prairie ended -- was a place where people could make a new start in life and recover from the discouragement of the past. The Golden State became this place, this new frontier. Unfortunately, this new frontier was already occupied.

West City

The ultimate objective of many who took part in the westward migration was that area known as "West City." This "City" was located within a series of valleys that extended the entire length of the land. The name "West City" has an inherent meaning, since it delimits the relatively poorer land to which these people were often relegated, which was located on the western side of the valleys.

In this new area many members of the Society experienced frustration and failure instead of the unlimited opportunity they had hoped the new frontier would bring. Where once they had been accepted members of society, in fact "the society," they now met with rejection of their customs and ideals. Too often they were given no opportunity to integrate themselves with their new neighbors. They suffered a social down-grading.

The local inhabitants saw a new people whose mobility was disorganized, whose children were undisciplined, whose clothes and bodies were unclean, and whose moral standards were low. These new people appeared to hold no regard for "decent" housing, clean yards, health standards, education, or the proper use of the English language. Clearly, they were different. This judgment was based primarily upon economic conditions, and members of the Society were relegated to a new status described as "poor." Although the basis was primarily economic, the classification provided by the term "poor" was also a description of the feelings of one culture about another culture.

In this setting the prejudice and bias of misunderstanding was set to boil and the Society was adjudged to be an inferior people. The "sentence" was rejection and isolation. This action removed any possibility of a reassessment of the Society based on objective considerations or closer acquaintance.

In this setting a metamorphosis of customs and ideals occurred within the people of the Prairie Society. Now, while persons of similar geographic origins were often accepted unconditionally into the Society, others were viewed with suspicion and contempt. Newcomers of a like background were given food, lodging, and every possible assistance when needed. For example, if the newcomer wanted to remain in West City he would be helped to get the appropriate building materials (often nothing more than peach boxes which were plastered over) or an empty dwelling that could be used for living quarters. The tent and cheap rent housing characterized these settlements. In fact, many were called "Tent City" by outsiders. In this way, another term with a negative connotation was coined to describe the people of the Prairie Society.

The desire for self-sufficiency dimmed and the age of manipulation evolved. The practice of manipulation was highly developed by many, and by pitting one man against another and one agency against another they gained the necessary sustenance. In fact, some members of the Society became extremely adept at taking the correct path and direction to realize the full benefit of public funds. Outsiders marveled at the complexity of the task and the ingenuity required. The reaction of the outsiders combined with the obvious admiration of members of the Society of an individual who could weave such a tangled web contributed significantly to an individual's self-esteem.

While the manipulative ability of members of the Society amazed outsiders, it also provided an additional source of dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction, coupled with emotion and specious reasoning, fostered a new wave of negativism toward the Society which, consequently, continued to build and increase personal protection.

The Society's protection consisted of a shell which it constructed about itself. For a culture that operated primarily on an emotional plane the composition of such a shell was obvious. It was built from factors comprising the affective domain where the need for love and the fear of failure were mixed to form the membrane while anxiety and stubbornness were the nuclei. Finally, the entire structure was coated with the inability to see or to hear. In this way the Society developed to an even higher degree the need to accept and be part of the customs and mores of their sub-culture.

However, even though a barrier existed between members of a sub-group, as the Prairie Society, and individuals outside that sub-group, the assumption cannot be made that either overtly or covertly there was a passive lack of activity behind the barrier. Furthermore, recognition should be given to the resiliency of the shell, the difficulty of making a breach, and the cell-like ability of the shell to divide and reform as an individual shell around those who venture outside the Society's community.

The desire to belong to someone or something, to experience love and feel needed, was too often thwarted by this protective shell. Thus, in order to compensate for this emptiness, other modifications took place in the behavior and customs of the Prairie Society. The concept of family took on an additional meaning. An enlarged family was often considered desirable though normally unplanned, since it represented individual security, a sense of belonging, and a means of obtaining additional public funds. Further, the family was now extended across the country and the existence of family "back home" also represented security and a sense of belonging. The extended and enlarged family was a significant characteristic of society members.

The automobile became a symbol of status, a way to be as "good" as the outsider without actually being a part of the outside world. Some jewelry, clothes, and a T.V. served a similar purpose. These objects provided a kind of equality, but one which lacked the ingredient of acceptance. The automobile also symbolized escape from the life they encountered, and provided mobility to cement the ties of the extended family whenever the need was felt. One of the more significant concepts which indicated behavioral modification was the way in which the role of relief checks was perceived by the Prairie Society. But to understand this issue, it is necessary to turn back to the time of Disraeli and the issue of public responsibility. Disraeli was perhaps the first person in the western world to espouse, through parliamentary action, the concept that a society was responsible for its less fortunate members.

This conservative meant much more than alms; he referred to opportunity and to hope. Prior to this time, history shows that societies had provided assistance, usually on an individual basis, and had rejected the recipients of this assistance as undesirables beyond rehabilitation. The alms were of more value to those who gave than those who received. This kind of assistance tended to perpetuate the condition of deprivation rather than to provide an opportunity for escape.

In the years that followed the actions of Disraeli, there evolved the policy of public assistance which was thought to represent an opportunity for people to help themselves. Whether or not this is the case is not at issue here. The point is that members of the Prairie Society saw this program as an opportunity to uphold the concept of self-determination through the use of public funds. Opportunity was provided, but not that envisioned by Disraeli. There were a number of factors which characterized this kind of "self-determination."

First, consider the self-protection made possible through the use of the relief check. Recipients could rely upon the regularity with which the checks would be received. Thus, the relief checks served as a constant source of security in a self-determination theme. In fact, any action which threatened and prevented this "working for the government" was considered foolish. This was an inherent reason why organizing members of the Prairie Society into a self-help group was often very difficult, since such self-help often entailed a threatening of the funding structure. Moreover, the routine work which could be secured was usually short-term, which meant a hungry family and another failure to be added to an already overflowing collection. The checks yielded protection against these difficulties so why would any rational man threaten their continued reception.

Another factor characterizing self-determination was that of responsibility. Responsibility was perceived in a somewhat atypical fashion, since its form actually appeared to be one of dependence. That is, the responsibility of members of the Society was to maintain a dependence upon the relief check. This was recognized by the outsider, who deduced that this form of responsibility was the result of an inadequate personality.

In actuality, the outsiders perpetuated this type of responsibility, which had little if anything to do with personality. This could be clearly seen by examining the guidelines contained within federal and state legislation concerning housing, medical aid, surplus foods, and education. The missing ingredient was not an inadequate personality, but the concept of involvement. In addition, consider the effects of advancing technology and the implications of automation, child labor laws, increased skill demands, and retirement upon the behavior of a people with the customs previously described.

The activity of the outsiders in these and other areas almost precluded escape from the responsibility to be dependent. Few, if any, did escape. Apparently the members of the Prairie Society were considerably more farsighted than the outsiders since Society members seemed to realize that dependence upon one another was vital for survival and was practiced by all peoples. Self-determination was possible if recognition was given to the need for dependency.

The final factor in this "self-determination" through the use of public funds was that of performance, or action. The discussion of manipulation suggested that the Prairie Society had developed this activity to the level of a science. Here was an act they could perform with great success, and observable success is an integral part of self-determination. Another aspect of performance was the element of extremes. Commitment to some activity was complete. The behavior of Society members contained little, if any, middle ground and few shades of grey. Facts were isolated unto themselves and were not generalized to new situations.

For example, the male was considered more mobile, more wise in the ways of the world and generally superior to the female. Religion was accepted without concern or simply rejected, and the old fashioned religion was considered best. Intellectualism was phony; a person could not perform some task, the fault lay with the business, agency or institution; the individual did not internalize failure, perform within the confines of an organization or become embroiled in political matters.

Opinions were not readily modified; for example, communism was considered despicable and any thought which could be considered even slightly pink was vigorously condemned, cops were out to "get you," and you were guilty until proven innocent. Lawyers were only for those who had the

money and justice was purchased. Members of the Society liked to perform in an informal manner, to work their problems out with their hands not their heads. Problems were solved through action -- doing something, even if it was wrong. Although generalization to specific cases cannot be made, the performance factor in self-determination may be the most informative and significant characteristic of the action-oriented Prairie culture.

When the meaning of self-determination for persons in the Prairie Society through the use of public funds is considered, there is no wonder that the Horatio Alger concept of self-help died or was, perhaps, murdered. After all, why should a person accept responsibility and again face the possibility of failure? Why strive for a middle-class status which contains an element of risk, threat, a multitude of problems, headaches and ulcers when, through the attitudes previously described, these possibilities can be eliminated? In this context falling back on the government for support was not charity, but self-determination. Moreover, what choice or opportunity was really available? It would seem that the structure of the society of the outsiders offered few opportunities to the eyes of members of the Prairie Society.

These were overt phenomena which, in part, explained the behavior of the Prairie Society. But were there any signs which suggested dissatisfaction with this way of life? Perhaps so, in the masochistic type of musical and vocal expressions; in the concern on the part of a few of the members that there were "gripes" of discontent, but little follow-up action by those with the loudest voices. Perhaps it was apparent in the rejection of those whose color or creed was dissimilar from their own; in the intensity, and in some cases, preoccupation with the emotions of hate and love,

which were nearly all-consuming; and finally, in the apparent severity of means, such as alcohol and drugs, which were used to escape reality.

Finally, this may all seem to have been some kind of shadowy world, but the start realism is there for those who take the time today to expose themselves to the society next door.

Epilogue

The stance of a people has been examined. It is clear that this culture does not proceed or perceive in the same manner as members of the middle-class society. Any program which is based upon obvious or superficial answers to the above problems, has not resulted from an examination of the complexity of the task ahead and will certainly fail. In fact, such a basis would indicate that the program was conceived with little real understanding of the people and what is involved. Such a program is probably an attempt to impose the standards of one sub-culture upon another which cannot understand them and will not accept them.

The desire to help a fellow human being is admirable in any culture, in all societies. It is the single most striking characteristic of a civilized culture. To be able to contribute something of value to humanity, to accept the responsibility to help another, is a significant achievement for the giver and the receiver. However, the least satisfactory and effortless act that can be performed in the name of help is to give someone money. As a medium for action, funds are needed but they are only a tool and not an end in themselves. The program must be people-oriented, and recognition given to the many contributions that can be made by those to be helped. The program must begin with that which exists and build thereon. It is only upon this basis that any lasting success can be achieved.

This attitude requires a program which encourages the use of imagination, is fluid enough to be adapted to anything that might work, and is truly innovative. In fact, such a program will be based on the assumption that the greatest need is for flexibility and that the structure currently

existing in education is more fancy than fact. Such programs do exist, but they appear to be few in number. One among them exists in Modesto, California. Here many members of the Prairie Society are eagerly striving toward modifications which will allow them to assume responsibility and participate in the Affluent Society. Through their own involvement they are helping themselves to open the windows of opportunity. Once more they seek a new frontier -- a Golden State -- but this time they can make their own.